DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 463 CS 212 912

AUTHOR Courage, Richard Arthur
TITLE The Interaction of Public and Private Literacies in Basic Writing Courses.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Students; *Basic Writing; Case Studies; Developmental Studies Programs; Educational Research; Higher Education; Learning Theories; *Literacy; *Models; *Nontraditional Students; *Prior Learning; Student Characteristics; *Student Experience
IDENTIFIERS Basic Writers

ABSTRACT

Two models of literacy stand in contrast to one another. The first, termed the "autonomous model" by British anthropologist Brian Street, portrays literacy as a value-free, technical skill which effects uniformly positive changes in both individuals and societies. The "ideological model," in contrast, focuses on specific social practices of reading and writing, exploring ways that these practices are embedded in and shaped by different sociocultural contexts. It also examines the relationships between literacy practices and social stratification and control. The ideological model can serve as a theoretical framework for examining the variety of literacy practices which returning adult students bring to college basic writing courses. Two case studies from a basic writing course at a college in New York City illustrate a key distinction between nonschool literacies that can be considered public and those that can be considered private. The literacy that a Black woman had acquired in her work as a preacher, religious educator, and pastoral counselor was very much a public literacy and lent itself to adaptation for academic literacy tasks. The literacy that a Puerto Rican woman had acquired as a homemaker and letter writer was a private literacy in conflict with the norms and practices of academic literacy, and she was forced to struggle against rather than build on the literacy she brought with her to the basic writing classroom. The ideological model challenges basic writing teachers to examine and understand students' various nonschool literacies. (SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED333463

Paper presented at the CCCC Convention, Boston, March 1991

The Interaction of Public and Private Literacies in Basic Writing Courses

Richard Arthur Courage
Westchester Community College
Valhalla, N.Y.

In this presentation I will briefly contrast two models of literacy and then employ one as theoretical framework for an analysis of the experiences of two adult basic writers.

The first model portrays literacy as a value-free, technical skill which effects uniformly positive changes in both individuals and societies. British anthropologist Brian Street identifies this as the "autonomous model." He claims that it is based on "the essay-text form of literacy" and that it generalizes broadly from a rather narrow, culture-specific literacy practice. The autonomous model can be found, with important specific variations, in the work of David Olson, Patricia Greenfield, Jack Goody, Ian Watt, and Walter Ong. According to Street, the autonomous model

> assumes a single direction in which literacy development can be traced, and associates it with "progress," "civilization," individual liberty and social mobility. It attempts to distinguish literacy from schooling. It isolates literacy as an independent variable and then claims to be able to study its consequences. These consequences are classically represented in terms of economic "take off" or in terms of cognitive skills. (2)

CS212912

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Richard Arthur Courage
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Street counterposes what he calls an "ideological model" to the autonomous model of literacy. The ideological model focuses on specific social practices of reading and writing, exploring ways that these practices are embedded in and shaped by different sociocultural contexts. The ideological model emphasizes the importance of the socialization process in constructing the meaning of literacy for participants and therefore examines all institutions through which socialization occurs, not just explicitly educational ones. It also examines the relationship between literacy practices and social stratification and control. Street finds examples of the ideological model in the work of Raymond Williams, Michael Clanchy, John Parry, Michael Cole, Sylvia Scribner, and Shirley Brice Heath.

As an anthropologist, Street has studied literacies which, from a western viewpoint, would be considered exotic, for example, the literacy acquired in Iran's "maktabs," informal village schools where children studied Koran in the years before the Islamic Revolution. My interest, however, is not in such exotic literacies but rather in ways that Street's ideological model might usefully serve as theoretical framework for examining different literacies within our own society, more specifically the variety of literacy practices which returning adult students bring to college basic writing courses. Within the ideological model we might view basic writing classrooms as places where

school literacy confronts a variety of nonschool literacies, many of which depend on or are intertwined with oral modes of communication. By contrast, the autonomous model tends to equate school literacy with literacy in general, to posit a sharp divide between oral and literate modes, and hence to portray basic writing classrooms as places where teachers instill literacy in people who are illiterate, or to use Ong's somewhat more generous phrase, "residually oral."

Some years ago I was a participant observer in a basic writing course at a college in New York City. Janette and Ethel were students who had been placed in that course to "remedy academic deficiencies." During my research I identified different types of reading and writing practices that each of them brought to the classroom and used with varying success to adapt to the demands of academic literacy. Time constraints prevent my presenting the actual data, which consist of writing samples, interviews, and observations, in any detail, so I will limit myself to an analysis of these two case studies within the framework of the ideological model. In the process, I will use these cases to illustrate a key distinction between nonschool literacies that can be considered public and nonschool literacies that can be considered private.

Janette was a black woman in her late thirties and a Pentecostal minister. In her work as preacher, religious educator, and pastoral counselor, she had acquired verbal

abilities, values, and conceptions of reading, writing, and communication in general that she put to good use in learning academic literacy. Among these were a conception of speaking and writing as public acts, a desire to use public forums to communicate useful ideas and information to other people, respect for textual authority and for book learning, a sense of sermons as public texts with distinct forms and purposes, an ability to shape and reshape those texts in her mind and, finally, awareness of a public audience's need for evidence, persuasive language, authoritative textual reference, and closure. It was most significant that Janette had acquired this literacy in the twenty years between high school and college. She had acquired it not in any educational institution but on the job, first by apprenticing herself to a Pentecostal bishop and later by leading her own church. This involved such activities as outlining and preaching sermons, leading Bible study classes, writing didactic plays based on Bible stories, and writing church newsletters and correspondence.

The literacy that Janette had acquired through her career was by no means identical with academic literacy, and she had much to learn in her basic writing course: how to edit her writing effectively, how to use writing as a mode of learning as well as a mode of communication, and how to develop an academic lexicon. Janette's great advantage, however, was that the nonschool literacy that she had

acquired in the years between high school and college was very much a public literacy and lent itself in various ways to adaptation for academic literacy tasks.

David Bartholomae has described basic writers as "shut out from one of the privileged languages of public life," i.e. academic literacy. Bartholomae seems to use the term "public life" in the commonly understood sense of social roles and activities pertaining to entire communities or institutions and also in its common opposition to "private" or "domestic" life. His formulation, however accurate, should not blind us to the fact that there are other languages of public life besides academic literacy, including the languages of government, business, the labor movement, community organizations, and religious bodies. The language of the African American churches may not be especially privileged in this society, but it is an example of an established public literacy which stands outside of the academy and to which some of our students, such as Janette, have access.

The second student, Ethel, was a New York-born Puerto Rican woman in her middle twenties, mother of two young children, and a homemaker. Like Janette, she had largely negative memories of high school and had done very little writing in school. Unlike Janette, she brought a literacy background of a more private sort to the basic writing classroom. Literacy in Ethel's life was a matter of making

lists, reading newspapers and magazines, filling out forms, and writing letters. While some of our colleagues might label Ethel illiterate in response to all the things she obviously did not know about academic literacy, she in fact carried on an extensive written correspondence with her brother and three sisters, all of whom were in the armed forces. She reported writing an average of two letters a week in order to, as she put it, "tell the news," "explain" herself, and "get things off [her] chest." While Janette met the demands of academic literacy by drawing on a parallel set of public literacy practices and conceptions, Ethel perceived little to draw on in her own reading and writing experiences. She believed that she could not write and had to learn from scratch, and she was obsessed with the most basic aspects of grammar and mechanics, especially handwriting. Her teachers and even her correspondents had frequently made fun of her handwriting, and she was at first reluctant to even show her work to her basic writing teacher.

Moreover, when Ethel did draw on her customary uses of language, she often found herself in conflict with the norms and practices of academic literacy. When the writing assignments shifted at midsemester from narrative to expository writing, Ethel and her classmates were asked to develop thesis statements on topics that they selected themselves. Ethel decided to write about men and read this

thesis statement aloud in class: "I see men as very hard to understand, very dominant, selfish, and inconsiderate." While her classmates, who were all women and mostly black and Hispanic, responded with indications of support and agreement, the teacher, a white woman, suggested: "It would be better to write an essay that is more objective than subjective and to take your feelings out." While Ethel accepted her teacher's tutelage in writing a thesis statement and an essay that were ostensibly more "objective," her original thesis statement (and in fact much of the writing she did for the class) suggested values, practices, and stylistic features that made perfect sense within her private literacy. Ethel was accustomed to expressing strong feelings that she held in common with an audience of intimate correspondents or interlocutors; she was unaccustomed to a form of literacy predicated on informing or persuading an unknown audience. Ethel was accustomed to using high-keyed, impassioned language when discussing a topic that she really cared about, such as men and their mistreatment of women; she was unaccustomed to the low-keyed, dispassionate style that her teacher labelled "objective." Her private literacy had few points of congruence with the public literacy of the schools. In learning academic literacy, she was forced to struggle against rather than build on the literacy she brought with her to the basic writing classroom.

The strikingly different experiences of Ethel and Janette touch on current research on literacy practices and the cultural construction of individual identity. Street argues in a recent paper that "Whichever forms of reading and writing we learn and use have associated with them certain social identities, expectations about behaviour and role models." This idea has implications for class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and other forms of social identification. Street refers, for example, to Kathleen Rockhill's study of the attitudes of Hispanic women in Los Angeles toward English language literacy. Rockhill describes how these women, in an attempt to escape from poverty and the control of dominating, often violent men, construct an image of an alternative identity for themselves that they associate with the acquisition of school literacy in English. Like Ethel, the women studied by Rockhill already practice considerable English literacy skills in managing households and dealing with government agencies and schools, but this private or domestic literacy is marginalized and accorded little social status. The literacy offered by college courses, however, is associated with higher status and with jobs and identities to which they aspire. It is associated specifically with the kinds of images found in film and magazine representations of the "professional" woman, the woman who is "Somebody."

When viewed through the lens of the autonomous model of literacy, Janette and Ethel's experiences in a basic writing class would probably be represented as stories about the struggle to acquire literacy. Janette's greater success in this struggle, as indicated by their teacher's evaluation, would likely be attributed to stronger motivation or the presence of fewer "linguistic deficits." The ideological model, on the other hand, casts a different light on their experiences. It would highlight Janette's sense of herself as a person already operating within the public realm, who "already writes in church," and is able to build on strong rhetorical skills developed through her nonschool literacy practices. It would contrast Janette's self-perception with Ethel's sense that she may not belong in college because of sloppy handwriting and because, more generally, she "can't write," despite the dozens and dozens of letters she has written to family members.

The ideological model challenges basic writing teachers in several ways. It challenges us, first of all, to become more self-aware in our classroom practice. It challenges us to examine and identify the specific features of an academic literacy that is fundamentally based on the essay as model text. It challenges us to examine and understand the various nonschool literacies in which our students participate so that we can, at a minimum, explain points of conflict and points of congruence between school and

nonschool literacies. It also potentially challenges us, as does feminist writing on the construction of gender, to find ways to bridge the gap between public and private spheres of life and language. Just as feminist literary scholarship has rediscovered and revalued letters, diaries, and other "domestic" literature in order to reclaim the hidden creativity of unknown women writers of earlier generations, basic writing teachers may need to learn how to discover and value the letters, diaries, and other forms of private literacy that fill our students' lives.

REFERENCES

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." Journal of Basic Writing 5:1 (1986): 4-23.

Ong, Walter J. "Literacy and Orality in Our Times." Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap. Ed. Winifred Bryan Horner. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1983.

Rockhill, Kathleen. "Literacy as Threat/Desire: Longing to be SOMEBODY." Women and Education: A Canadian Perspective. Eds. Jane S. Gaskell and Arlene Tigar McLaren. Calgary: Detselig, 1987, 315-331.

Street, Brian V. "Cross-Cultural Literacy." Paper presented at Teachers College Conference on Intergenerational Literacy. New York City: March 16, 1991.

Street, Brian V. Literacy in Theory and Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.

R.A. Courage March 1991